

# **The Love Letter Box**

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Kristina Paul

Thesis Advisor  
Laurie Lindberg

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Laurie Lindberg". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first name "Laurie" and last name "Lindberg" clearly distinguishable.

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Abstract

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My novella, The Love Letter Box, is a story told through letters exchanged between a man and woman over the span of their lifetime. As though the letters are being picked out of a box at random, they jump around chronologically but the main story is eventually uncovered as more information about the characters is revealed. The story of Jennifer and Ethan is one of trials, confusion, loneliness and waiting, while still remaining grounded in faith and hope. It is a story that anyone can relate to, because every person has experienced these emotions at some time in her or his life. Preceding the novella is my author statement, which explains my creative process for the story and how many elements in the letters were inspired by my own life.

## Acknowledgements

- I would like to thank Dr. Laurie Lindberg for taking time out of her very busy schedule to advise and encourage me with my novella.
- I would like to thank Red, Jill, and Neil for reading my story ahead of time and giving me their thoughts, ideas, and the courage to think I could write this novella.
- I would like to thank Chelsea for putting up with me when I am in one of my “moods” and for being my confidence in these times when I struggle and lose sight of hope.
- Finally, I would like to thank my mother. She has always been there, helping and guiding me. I value her opinions and insight into this story as well as in my life, for she is one of my dearest friends. Her never failing love and support has made me who I am today.

## **My Story – Author Statement**

My story started early one Saturday afternoon during the fall of my sophomore year at Ball State. I was in a mood...a “blah” mood. Anyone who has ever experience one of those moods knows that it causes a state of strong emotions for no apparent reason. I guess you could say I was feeling disconnected or lethargic. Regardless of how I try to explain it, I was in a mood, and I began thinking about how a person can know that someone loves her.

My whole life I have struggled with loneliness. As a child, my family moved on average every 2.5 years, and because of that I never felt that I really had the stability that I saw other people have. I didn't have a home that I'd lived in all my life. I didn't have friends that I had grown up with since we were little and saw every day at school. I did have my immediate family, and because of the moving we were very close. I had my cousins, the only people I could say I've been friends with my whole life, but we never lived near by for long, so even those friendships were distant and only remained because we were related. So, I always struggled with loneliness.

I remember having conversations with my mother when I would cry because I just wanted a friend – that one close, special person who would accept me as I was, love me for me (faults and all), and be close to me for the rest of our lives. I remember my mom telling me that I would find that person some day, and it would probably be the man I married. Having that dream, of that man waiting for me out there somewhere, helped me through times of doubt and loneliness.

In high school, I never dated. This was partly because I was never asked, but also because I knew there wasn't any point. Why date someone when I would probably end

up at a different college and never see him again? This didn't stop me from caring for the people I was around. There was one friend that I especially grew to love deeply. I knew that we were not right for each other, and that he would never return my feelings, but I did and still do love him dearly. He was a friend when I felt I had none, and the acceptance he showed me when I was new to the high school (we moved again during my junior year) meant more to me than I could ever tell him. He was the first person that I ever really loved, and even though I knew we would never be right for each other, I still think about and pray for him often. However, even with my feelings for him (which would influence letters I would write about the time when Ethan and Jennifer are in high school), I was able to move on with relative ease because I knew that the man I would be with, the friend I waited for, would come later in my life.

I had my life all mapped out. I was going to come to college, and that was where I would meet the man of my dreams. So of course when I hadn't met the man I was destined to spend my life with by the end of the first semester, I was angry. I was mad at God because he wasn't working with my plan! Didn't He know that I was ready to have the man of my dreams now? After all, I'd been waiting (with pretty decent patience, I must say) all this time to meet my friend, the man I would love, when I came to college. God, of course, had other plans and I did meet the friend I had prayed for so many years ago. Chelsea (the closest and dearest friend I have ever known, for whom I thank God daily) came into my life along with other wonderful new friends. I was also back in my hometown and developing relationships with my cousins who had been there for me (even if from a distance) throughout my life. But there was still no man to love and be loved by.

It really wasn't too bad being alone, at least not in the beginning. I would still have my moments of loneliness and self-pity, but I was always kept pretty busy. On more than one occasion, I could be heard saying, "Are you kidding, I don't have time for a boyfriend." This was, of course, an empty excuse to make me feel better about my singleness because there was just enough truth to it to make me believe my own lie. I'm not too busy to have a relationship...people can make time for relationships even when it seems there's no time to be found. Relationships are the one thing that makes everything we go through day in and day out worthwhile. The lack of a close, intimate, and romantic relationship was a constant ache deep inside me, more easily ignored when I was busy, but never truly forgotten or removed.

So, out of my experience past and hopes for the future, I began writing letters of love, pain, and hope. The story I have created is based very much on my own life, as the letters were usually written during times of intense personal emotions. In the guise of fiction, I released and stretched parts of myself to create a world where Ethan and Jennifer not only experienced the same emotions I did, but they lived the dream...the love...I hope to one day have.

The story adapted and changed through the telling. Because it is strongly based on my own emotions and experiences, as my life changed, so aspects of the story changed and evolved. For instance, in a moment of personal uncertainty I wrote the "Doubt Poem." The poem was only written as a release for myself in the moment, but I soon after realized that it perfectly voiced what Jennifer (and others who struggle to trust in God's promises and plans for their lives) feel all the time. It could fit wonderfully into the story! Suddenly I had the idea that Ethan enjoyed writing poetry, and was now able

to expand his character to have him occasionally include poetry written over the years into his letters.

The bookend “I Believe” statements are another example of my own work adapted for the story. I’m sorry to say that I was extremely bored one day during an honors class (the scheduled speaker suddenly couldn’t come so we were watching a video that wasn’t holding my attention) and Chelsea had told me of an assignment she did in high school when the students were told to write “I Believe” statements. One hour and two full pages of paper later, I had an enormous list of my personal “I Believe” statements. Later as I typed them up so I could keep them forever, I realized how interesting it might be if Jennifer had written “I Believe” statements in high school, and then again right before she died. Because the character is so closely based upon myself, I went through the list I had written and decided what I thought she might have felt in high school and then imagined what she might have believe after years of living, loving, and having nearly reached the end of her earthly journey. This would provide the book-ending symmetry to bring the story full circle.

As I mentioned before, loneliness is one of my greatest struggles, so many of the letters were written in times when I was feeling the hole inside myself that waited to be filled by the man who would win my heart. These were times when I was alone in my parents’ house over Christmas break and had gone to see a movie by myself. Times when I had gone out with my cousins and friends, all of whom were newly married, engaged, or at least seriously dating someone while I was the *only* person in the group still single. These were the letters I wrote when I needed to release the doubt and pain I felt. They were also letters where I shared what I hoped for in my future.

Just as I had a friend in high school who inspired some of the emotions Jennifer goes through in high school in my story, there were two other men who would influence my life and inspire letters. The first was a friend who caused me to think that we could be perfect together, if only he would notice me. He inspired the letter “Diamond in the Rough” though I’m sure he would never know that I had any interest in him because I am so very horrible at exposing myself because I could be bitterly hurt and rejected. (Plus, I knew he thinks that men should make the first move, and since he never did, it didn’t take me too long to finally get over him for good.) Even though he’ll never know about my “crush,” I thank him for helping me to write one of my favorite letters in the collection because it is so simply “me.”

The other man that would influence my writing is harder to write about because he is still in my life and I am still experiencing feelings for him, though he certainly has no idea. I could never have known that some areas of my life would eerily parallel the story plot I had outlined for Ethan and Jennifer. And so, though still a story of fiction, the emotions in “Stabs of Pain” and “Afraid to Lose the Pain” are very real and extraordinarily personal. So personal, in fact, that I had to wait to write “Stabs of Pain” a few months after I initially experienced those emotions for the first time because at that moment, though I had a huge desire to write what I felt, I knew that I wouldn’t want to read it in the morning because I was too ashamed of my own feelings. I eventually did write the letter and also included the one I would write later (“Afraid to Lose the Pain”) because I realized that they were a part of “my story” and as such were then a part of “the story.” Just as I am made up of multiple dimensions, so too are Ethan and Jennifer, and I realized that Jennifer had become too kind and hopeful. I had shown her sides of doubt



and fear, but wanted to show that she had anger and jealousy in her just like the rest of us, though she would always be a hopeful and trusting soul in the end.

Ultimately, this story boils down to hope. I personally experience my fair share of doubt, despair, disbelief, and times of little faith, but everyone has these times, which is why this story will speak to so many people, Christian or not. To fear, despair, be angry, and lose hope or faith is to be human. But it is also human to love, laugh, and rejoice! So, once I am done with my occasional pity-parties, I try to look on the bright side of life. I truly do believe that my life will work out for the best, according to the plan of a God that loves me. I don't know what that plan is, and it causes me no end of grief trying to wait for him to reveal it to me step by step, but I really do believe that I will have a good and blessed life. It won't be perfect by any means, but it will be blessed. And so I try to start each new day by doing a little better (and know that on the days when I take steps back, there is always tomorrow to start fresh).

My personal life story is still being written, so I can only hope and believe that it will turn out to have as much love and joy as Ethan and Jennifer were able to experience. Though my life is (I hope!) far from over, this story, [The Love Letter Box](#), contains my thoughts from the past, my emotions from the present, and my dreams for the future. It is so much more than a story that I wrote, it is truly "My Story" and I hope that readers will enjoy it and learn from it as much as I have.

# The Love Letter Box

By Kristina Paul

## Preface

It started with a new home and a beautiful box. My house is very old and very small, but being a single and relatively young woman starting a promising new job, the house seemed like a better choice than wasting money on rent. Plus, I like the house. It has a certain charm that only older homes in neighborhoods with big overgrown trees and cracked, uneven sidewalks can have. The house came with more than just charm. It also came with dust, a few mice friends, and a box.

In the attic, my first impression was of a dust more intense than I'd ever experienced. It was only after a sneezing fit that I came back to that attic wearing a little white mask from the hardware store and saw the box. It didn't look to be very old, but it was beautiful, carefully placed in a corner away from all the other discarded and forgotten items, as though not meant to be harmed or disturbed. Most of the items I left in the attic to be thrown away or explored later, but I took the box downstairs with me.

Inside I found a collection of letters that had to be older than the box which housed them. Perhaps Ethan put the letters in the box before he went to Heaven to join his wife. Or maybe one of his children found the letters and stored them in the box. Or maybe the letters somehow made their way to this house where they were forgotten until a curious child found them and, treasuring them so much, placed them in the box to keep them safe. But the child grew up and forgot the letters of love, hope, and pain because she had her own life to live.

Whatever may have happened, the letters had now been passed on to me, and I have been forever changed. So now I'm passing them on to you. It's possible you may

take nothing from them but a lovely story. Maybe they were meant only to help me. But I think these letters were written to give us hope. And maybe, if you're willing to try in our world of the "negative nightly news at nine," the story of the letters will touch your heart and help you open your eyes to the love all around you. Perhaps then you will begin to live a love that touches lives and changes your own.

## **Obituary:**

Jennifer Anne McBride died on Tuesday night at the age of 54. Jennifer was the wife of Ethan McBride and mother of Abigail Turner, Adam McBride, and Daniel McBride. Mrs. McBride taught mathematics at Highland Middle School for 30 years she quit for health reasons her last year. Her students will always remember her as the teacher that for the first time made math fun. Her colleagues and friends attribute her success as a teacher to her philosophy that "You're teaching students, not a subject." Her involvement in the community and the lives of those she touched through her years of service will ensure that she lives on in the memories of all that knew her. Jennifer McBride will be greatly missed.

## **I Believe Statements by Jennifer when she is in college:**

*I believe in God.*

*I believe in love.*

*I believe in laughing so hard it hurts.*

*I believe in crying.*

*I believe my family will always be there for me.*

*I believe you can love someone with all your heart even if they aren't the one for you.*

*I believe in being lonely, but*

*I believe I am never really alone.*

*I believe in chocolate.*

*I believe in imaginary friends.*

*I believe in dancing when no one is looking.*

*I believe in logical reasoning.*

*I believe in the supernatural, even when it scares me.*

*I believe I don't need to fear the unknown.*

*I believe in life after death.*

*I believe I have a purpose.*

*I believe this purpose is greater than anything I can begin to imagine.*

*I believe I will find the love of my life, but*

*I believe that, though I'm tired of waiting, God knows best when that should be.*

*I believe in alone time.*

*I believe in frustration.*

*I believe in smiles and hugs.*

*I believe in physical touch.*

*I believe in crying with and for those I love.*

*I believe in feeling pretty.*

*I believe in passion.*

*I believe I am worthy of love.*

*I believe in kindness.*

*I believe in today and the promise of tomorrow.*

*I believe in the supernatural, even when it scares me.*

*I believe I don't need to fear the unknown.*

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*I believe in kindness.*

*I believe in today and the promise of tomorrow.*

## Letter 1: Nearing the End

Dearest,

"Don't ask why." I'm so sorry that I told you that, but I was young and unsure how to answer a question so important. But now it's time I told you why, for it's never too late...

Do you remember that day in the hospital? As I lay in the bed, you stood with tired eyes and tear stained cheeks by my side. I told you that everything would be OK because God had told me so, and you tried to believe me. Then I began to motion weakly for you to come closer. With my lips gently brushing your hair, I whispered the words I'd rehearsed so many times before, "Jennifer, I love you."

You pulled back looking as though in a dream. You tried to speak, but I stopped you saying, "No, please Jennifer. Don't ask why." And you never did.

It wasn't love at first sight. It wasn't even a close friendship at first introduction. I always liked you, but (ridiculous as it may sound) I was so uncomfortable around you for such a long time, simply because you were a girl. Eventually I learned to relax and we became very good friends. We were both searching for that person God had created just for each of us, and we learned and grew together. Do you remember all those late nights when we would just talk for hours? We'd talk about life, hard times, love, longing, and trusting God through it all. I was such an idiot in my youth. I thought I had everything, I thought I had it all figured out...I didn't know anything. Why did it take me so long to see you? Why didn't



you give up on me through all of my wandering? You were, and still are, the strongest woman I've ever known and I thank God for you daily!

Eventually I realized my own heart. I truly saw you standing there in front of me, and I knew that you were the one. Isn't it strange how God works? It's just like you said, you have to wait because what God has for you is so much more amazing than anything you could ever try and force yourself. Isn't it true of you and me!

We finally had the relationship we had both spoke of wanting, and we found it in each other. The years had their ups and downs, but with the help of God and lots of love, we always made it through. You were my constant helper and lover. I wouldn't be who I am, where I am, had it not been for you. You put laughter, joy, peace, and reassurance into my life. You built up our house and family. You raised our children to love and follow God. You served others before yourself. All I've learned of kindness in this world is through watching you.

And now, lover, we're back to the beginning. But things are slightly changed, for it is you lying in the bed, and me standing by your side with tears running down my stained cheeks. Why does life work like this? Why are you leaving me?

And you look up at me with eyes still so bright, weakly trying to motion me closer. I lean over you and smooth your hair with my hands. Smiling down upon you, I nod my head and close my eyes in pain. I know what you want to say, though you lack the strength. But where do I begin? How do you tell the one you love in just the few last moments what has taken you a lifetime to only begin to understand?

Opening my eyes I look at the peaceful smile on your mouth and know that I have nothing to worry about. Words will never be enough, and that's all right. Honestly, you've always known the answer. But still, it's time I told you why...

## **Letter 2: Missing You**

Dear Self,

*How can you miss someone you've never even met? I sit here feeling...something. How strange that I can't even figure out what this odd sadness I have is or where it is coming from. All I know is that I feel some kind of loneliness. Not the loneliness that hits you in the pit of your stomach where you actually ach from the weight of it all. This is more of a disabling numbness that takes away all the other feelings along with the loneliness. I imagine that the shock one feels while they mourn would be something like this. How pathetic that I should be feeling this when I have no good reason. To say that I am mourning for someone that I miss but have never met...it seems to cheapen the real pain that others in the world are feeling even at this moment as I write these lines. And yet, my pain is no less real or worthy than anyone else's, because it is my own, real, and important to me. I don't know how else to explain it.*

Last night I was searching for a book to read. It didn't have to be new to me, just something to fit the mood I was in. So it couldn't be too light and funny, but I didn't want something dark or overly heavy. In the end I knew what I wanted, but I've never found such a story yet. I wanted something beautiful, visual, grand, touching, and heartfelt. But at the same time I wanted romance that withstood the tests, heroes that lived to fight another day, and above all I wanted hope. I realized that I was looking for a book that would fit what I longed for in my own life. I want my life to be a beautiful and sweeping journey that gives everyone, including myself, hope. I want a story that ends with the main characters embracing and knowing that from then on, everything is going to be wonderful, if not perfect. But life isn't perfect, it's often even far from wonderful.

I believe I have a choice to see the good in my life, and I believe that there is still so much that I have yet to experience. Even when I feel discouraged, I remind myself that I am still young. I have never had the joy of a boy asking me out. I've never even had the small thrill of holding the hand of a man that I care about. There are so many things I have never done...but I am still young. Yet, that does not stop me from missing him, wherever he is. All I can

do now is to keep my hope that someday we'll find each other and have a wonderful (not perfect) life together. In the mean time, I must pray for him and myself. I'll pray that he waits for me, that he searches after God's will for his life, and that he is happy. For myself I'll pray that I draw closer to the Lord, that I live his will for my life, that I keep my faith, and that I learn to appreciate the wonders around me and not lose myself in looking to the future. The future will come when it does, and it does me no good trying to live in the light of a time yet to be and ignore what is here and now.

*Jennifer*

### **Letter 3: High School**

Jennifer,

I can't believe we've just graduated high school! We're about to go out and begin making our mark on the world. I can't be more ready to get out of this town and experience new places and people! Yet even as I'm excited to go, I can't help regretting that I won't be near you anymore.

I want to thank you for everything you've meant to me over the past two years. I know that when you first moved here freshman year, I didn't spend much time with you or even give you much of a chance, and for that I will always be sorry. To be

honest, I was a bit scared of getting to know you because you always seemed like such a good person that I was sure you would see all the terrible faults of mine and want nothing to do with me. I know now how ridiculous I was to think such things, but I didn't want you to think badly of me.

Ever since we started spending more time together, I've continually thanked God for the friend I've found in you. I have never been able to be this open and honest about my hopes for the future or what I believe, and I've never had a friend who could share their dreams with me. I know that it took time, but I'm so glad that we were finally able to trust each other enough to really share our hearts. Talking to you always lifts me up...it's the highlight of my day and I hope you feel the same way.

I know that the distance between us will make our friendship change. We will be meeting new people, experiencing new things, and we will each have our own separate lives. I only hope that we can remain in contact and see each other often when we come home to visit. You are one of my closest friends and I couldn't stand to lose you.

I wish you all the best in everything that life brings your way! Most of all, I pray that you are happy and that you find everything that you are looking for. You are an amazing person, and you don't give yourself enough credit. Whatever happens in our lives as we move forward, know that you will always have a special place in my heart.

Ethan

## Letter 4: Diamond in the Rough

Dear Ethan,

I'm going to be very honest with you. (It's easy to do when I know that I will never actually give you this letter.) Why do I do this to myself? I tell myself that it doesn't matter - how I feel about you doesn't matter. In some ways I have to say that, because if I really let myself get caught up in all my daydreaming and make believe, I would only be setting myself up for a horrible heartache in the end. I know that all my dreams of someday having a life with you are pointless. I'm not trying to sell myself short, but I realize that I'm probably not at all the type of girl you have always wanted. I'm not the prettiest, the skinniest, or the most lighthearted. I like to laugh and have fun, but I'm serious and I want to know that business will get taken care of properly. I don't eat as well as I should, and I like reading books far too much, but I can't help being attracted to places I'll never go and living experience through the characters that I will personally never have. (I'm telling you this because I want to be honest about my faults.)

My mother said that, like my father, I'm a diamond in the rough. She said that people never see just how wonderful my father really is, which worked to her advantage, because then she was able

to have him for herself. Now, maybe it's silly to take a compliment like that so seriously, especially when it comes from your mother...but it has really meant a lot to me. I don't know how I will make someone so happy, because I certainly have plenty of faults, but maybe she's right. Perhaps there will one day come a person who will see all the wonderful things in me and forgive my shortcomings. Is it so wrong to hope that person will be you?

No, I can't, because as soon as I begin allowing my thoughts to place you in my life, I can't seem to stop them from growing. If only it wasn't so hard to suppress my crush on you. I have done it before. I had one wonderful week where I dreamt about you in my sleep and waking hours. I imagined how you would fall in love with me, our courtship, and our life together. For seven days, a part of me lived the experience and it was more wonderful than anything I had ever imagined before. But then I realized that imagining and dreaming were painful when faced with the reality that you would hardly ever speak to me or even acknowledge my presence. So I made up my mind to stop dreaming. I was going to only try and become your friend, with no hidden agenda. I just wanted to get to know you and be able to count you as a friend. In my mind it was all working out as planned, and when I didn't see you outside of school

for a while I thought I had succeeded. But then I saw you again tonight.

It's been a while since we've spent even the smallest amount of time together, but tonight you spoke to me more than you have in a very long time. You teased me about some of the music I like, but we found that we had some things in common. As the group gathered around to play a game, I found myself very self-conscious of how I was sitting and what I was wearing. I wanted to look good, and more importantly, I wanted you to think I looked good. Of course, I have no idea what you thought of me...and that really doesn't matter because the whole point is that I thought I had gotten over all that. I thought I was over my dream of you, but it seems that I must once again talk myself out of hoping that you will see me as a diamond. I think if I could just be your friend...if we could really be true friends, then I would be able to get over you. Because if we were close friends, then I would know that you liked me, but if you didn't love me, then it would just be because we were not meant for each other, and I would know that God had another out there for me. But as it is now, I just keep hoping for something, anything...even the smallest amount of attention from you makes me begin to hope that we could be something...even if it was only good friends. At this



point in time, that would be enough, but I don't even know if I will get that.

So, why do I do this to myself? Why do I torture myself with dreams and fantasy? And what do I do now? What do we do now? You know...the funny thing about all this is that I'm sure you have no idea that this is even happening all around you. Perhaps it will all seem better tomorrow.

Good night, Ethan, and sweet dreams to us both.

## **Letter 5 (Poem by Ethan in high school): As Night Falls**

As night falls, a lonely shadow creeps into my room.

Slowly I get ready for bed, knowing that tomorrow will be more of the same.

Everything is a continuation of the day before.

When will things change? When will my life be rearranged?

I lie in bed and stare at the ceiling,

Daring sleep to come and sweep me into the world of fanciful dreams

Both joyous and colorful or haunting and bleak.

Will peace be found tonight? Will tomorrow's dawn be bright?

The sun and moon fight for the sky, and I...

I side with the light, warm and inviting. The haze swiftly withdraws

Like a child's night terrors soon forgotten after waking.

Where will this day take me? Where hide the wonders I long someday to see?

The day is spent and I no longer hope for change.

No adventure has come today,

But there is always the promise of tomorrow.

How will tomorrow unfold? How shall I finally learn to be bold?

Ethan

## **Letter 6: To the Great Beyond**

*To the great beyond,*

*How are you? We haven't talked for a while. (Isn't it interesting that I meant for this first part to be funny and nonsensical, but it ended up being rather poignant.) After all, it has been a while since we really talked, hasn't it, God? Oh, that certainly isn't your fault, but why is it so hard? Why don't I just want to spend more time with you? Why is everything such a struggle and why am I always so tired? Even now, I'm just tired. And yet I have so many blessings in my life that I have absolutely no reason to complain! God, why am I so...stuck? Why is every day basically the*

same? Why do I put myself down? Why am I so lonely even when there are people around? Why don't I have more faith?

Do I ask too many questions? Well, I hate to tell you this, but I don't think that will ever change. I like questions. Even questions where the answer is "No" or "Not Yet." And though I get impatient when I don't get any kind of answer, I'm trying to work on my attitude. But here's my latest question: "What's my purpose? What's my destiny?"

I know that I'm meant for more than just teaching students mathematics. I'm even meant for more than just being a wife and mother some day (though I very much want both those things). I love what my father told me once, "You're teaching more than a subject, you're teaching students." I want to teach my students what is really important in life, like kindness, consideration, believing in yourself and doing your best. But how do I teach these things to my students when I feel like I myself haven't even gotten them right? And is that all that there is to my destiny, or is there even more than that? I want to be the person that you want me, need me, to be. But that's much harder than it sounds.

I don't want to have a Jonah heart where I run away, but I feel like I do, and it scares me. I truly do want to live in your will. I

want to be used by you for your glory and plan. But at the same time, it scares me to give over all the control, even to one as wonderful and loving as the all-knowing God of the universe. I just wish it wasn't so hard...but maybe that's all part of the plan. Maybe, for me, this is supposed to be hard. Ohhh...I don't know...I'm just glad that you love me no matter how I fall and fail. Thank you for that, Lord.

*Jennifer*

## **Letter 7: Mirror**

My Darling,

The children came to visit today. They're so concerned about me, and I appreciate their love and support more than these feeble words shall ever correctly express. Through all their own pain, they make extraordinary efforts to keep me busy, happy, and distracted so as to alleviate my grief, if only for a short time. But, until it happens to them, (and God, please let that be such a long time from now!) they will not understand the immense emotions that go along with the loss of one's soul mate and best friend. They have their own lives, families, problems, and joys, so, my

beloved, do not worry about them. They are, and will remain, wonderfully blessed, though they miss you terribly.

As for me...what can I say? What can I do? Where do I start? I start by getting up in the morning. I walk across the cold floor of kitchen tiles to make the coffee that only I will drink. That hasn't changed. You never drank coffee; you didn't like it. But now you will not be there to breathe deeply of the strong odor of the brewing drink. And you will not be there to roll your eyes as you refrain from telling me, yet again, to rinse out my dirty, empty mug. The mirror in the bathroom holds only one face's reflection today, and I won't grumble as you choke me with your hairspray, and your elbows invade my space as you wage battle with your stubborn hair. Instead, the face in the mirror is alone, looking more tired and aged than it did when your face was observed beside it. When did this wrinkle appear? When did the hair get so grey? Surely the mirror is playing tricks! Surely you will soon appear by my side, and then the image of this man that I faintly recognize will again have his lover by his side, and the wrinkles will recede, the grey darken to brown, and the eyes so dull will alight once again.

Yet, the image remains grim, for it knows what the heart cannot bear to admit...that you will not round the corner to stand beside me. The image shall remain alone, and this knowledge makes my heart ache all the more.

Ethan

## Letter 8: Night Before

My Darling Jennifer,

Can you believe everything that has happened over the past year? It still seems all so unreal and unbelievable to think that this could happen to us! It seems as though it was just yesterday that I saw you as only a friend...even my best friend, but never more than that. Why was I so stupid? Why did I waste so much time? The irony of it all, that we should sit up late at night talking about how much we want someone to love and be loved by, when we never saw that in each other was everything we were seeking! Well, perhaps it is only I who was the blind one. You always saw more, knew more, and understood more about me than even I do to this day. How is that? How do you know me so well, while I still remain a mystery to myself?

Do you have the same problem? Are there times that I understand and know you better than you know yourself? Probably not...and yet...I know how beautiful you are, when you can't seem to see it yourself. I know how kind you are, when you feel selfish or self centered. You don't see your spiritual wisdom and maturity, but I see the love, care, and attention you give others that can come only from a person striving to have a heart like God's. Your strong values and principles set you apart from the world, and yet you love and want to reach out to understand and comfort those that are still in the world. You aren't perfect; no one is...but you are perfect for me, and I'm sorry that I didn't realize that sooner.

But now, amazingly, we will be together for the rest of our lives! Now, all the time I wasted wandering and unseeing doesn't matter, because tomorrow we will be

joining hands, hearts, loves, and lives to begin anew together. Tomorrow, you will become mine and I yours as we vow to love, help, and cherish each other. You will walk into my outstretched arms and we will become man and woman, husband and wife. We will laugh and dance with our friends and family until, in the end, we will lie together loving each other all night and for the rest of our lives. And do you know what I believe? I believe that our love will survive even after death parts us. Because nothing as temporary as death and the distance it creates can overcome or dampen the love that we share. I will love you through all of this life and the next! That is my promise to you, Jennifer. That is my vow.

## **Letter 9: Help God**

*God, Ethan really needs your help. The doctors say he won't make it, that there is very little time left, and it is hopeless. But, God, I know that you love Ethan, and you have a plan for his life. I believe your plan for him does not end here, tonight in this hospital. God, I don't know why you placed Ethan in my life or me in his. I don't know what purpose will come from the pain and loss we've already suffered tonight, but I trust you no matter what. I love Ethan... you know that. I love him with all my heart and I am giving it all back to you because you love Ethan more than I ever could. And Lord, I know*

*you say you'll never give us more than we can handle, but I don't know how much more of this I...we can take. If you take him too, I know he'd be in a better place, but...I can't lose him! Please, God, we need a miracle!!! Ethan needs a miracle!*

## **Letter 10: Will You Ever Understand?**

*Dear Ethan,*

*I can't believe all the events that have happened in such a short time. To think we came so close to losing you. That I came so close to losing you. You are my closest and most cherished friend, Ethan. I don't know what I would do without you.*

*When your mother called to tell me that you and Robby were in the hospital, I didn't understand. She started crying and couldn't seem to say what had happened. And when she finally told me that there had been an accident, I instantly knew that it was very bad. The fact that she wasn't able to tell me anything else, that she didn't say that either of you were all right, and that she couldn't stop crying, regardless of how hard she was trying, reinforced my fear.*

*I prayed fervently the entire drive to the hospital, and when I arrived, I found your parents looking sick with worry. No one knew anything, no one was telling us what was going on, but we could tell*



by the way that the nurses wouldn't look your mother in the eye, that you were both in very bad condition.

Finally, a doctor came to us, saying that you were being rushed into surgery. It was very risky, but without the operation, you would die. Still no word about Robby. So again we waited, praying, crying, but rarely talking. To pray was comforting. To cry was an emotional release. But to talk, to really talk...well, that was more exhausting than any of us could handle. So we sat there, just being together, waiting.

When we were told that you had survived surgery, your mother cried with joy, a joy that was short lived when the doctor told us that Robby had not been as lucky. In the midst of my pain, fear still tore at my insides. "Survived the surgery?" It sounded like sticking a Band-Aid on a bullet wound and saying, "you'll be alright for now," even though everyone knows it's not really going to help. But you "survived" the surgery, and then you "survived" through the night, another miracle according to the nurses who didn't realize anyone was listening in on their hushed conversation.

When we were finally able to visit you, you were so pale and gaunt that I began to silently cry again. How can I describe what I felt? Upon looking at you, I instantly experienced so many

conflicting emotions that it's a wonder I didn't collapse under the weight of it all falling upon me at once. Shock, nausea, sympathy, grief, horror, rage, compassion, love, concern...all flowed through my body, wave after wave.

Other friends and family had come and gone throughout the entire process, but I refused to leave. I was determined to be there for your parents and for you. As you lay there asleep, I read to you, sang to you, prayed for you, and mostly just talked to you. Everything I had ever wanted to tell you. Everything that I wanted you to know, but had been too afraid to say. Every hope for a future, a future with you, which I scarcely dared to even dream about, let alone voice aloud to you, I shared with you as you lay in the hospital bed. Why do people become more open and honest in hospitals? Is it because we are forcibly reminded of how short life can be, and we suddenly realize that if we don't say the important things now, if we put them off to another day, we may lose the chance to say them at all? We may lose that day when we were finally going to lay it all out there, be honest, open, and completely expose ourselves to the world around us. Well, Ethan, you have helped me so much to realize that it's OK to be me. It's OK to be goofy and silly, to not take myself too seriously, and you always make me feel precious and beautiful. I don't know

how you do it, but when I'm with you I feel like I have gifts, talents, and something to offer to others around me. I want you to know how much I appreciate you. You are the best friend and man that I have ever met, and I thank God for bringing you into my life.

There is one other thing that I have to be honest about. After your proclamation of love, I realized something. Ethan, I love you. I have always loved you, and I will always love you. You have no idea how long I have dreamt of hearing you say those words that you so lovingly whispered to me the day you woke up in the hospital. I had imagined every detail, from the sound of your voice, the look in your eyes, the touch of your hand on mine...everything, and it was all so much better than any imagining could ever have been. The only problem is that I can't be with you. I do love you. I love you so much; you can't even begin to understand how hard this is. Since the day I met you, all I've wanted is for some sign that you might one day feel for me as I felt for you. Why God, would you have that day be the day when I finally came to the realization that I was chasing after an imaginary dream! Oh God! I just don't know if, or how...Oh, will you ever forgive me? Will you ever understand?

## Letter 11: Note

My Darling Jennifer,

You're right, I don't quite understand, but I'm sure there is nothing to be forgiven. Please, just tell me what's wrong. I want to be here for you. I want to help you, to hold you, to comfort you! Was it something I said? Please, talk to me; don't shut me out. I love you, Jennifer! I know it's terrible of me to not explain my feelings to you more clearly, but I barely understand them myself. Everything is so confusing right now, but I'm going to work it all out, I promise! In the meantime, please be patient and wait for me! Just remember that I love you, I Love You,

I LOVE YOU!!!!

Please, just let me help. Tell me what you need me to do...anything. Please, talk to me. Let me see you, please!

## Letter 12: First Kiss

Honey,

It's truly amazing just how stupid a man can be in his youth. All right, so I'm not really all that old now, but I was looking through some old photos trying to find an embarrassing picture of Daniel for his graduation cake. In the process, I found many pictures of us from years and years ago. One that especially struck me was a picture that I had all but forgotten about. Do you remember the picnic a few

weeks after I was released from the hospital? We were still in a, what would you call it, a tiff? (For some reason, my proclamation of love hadn't gone over as well as I'd planned. No big shock there, now that I think about it.) Anyway, Steve had snapped a picture of us sitting together under a tree away from all the socializing. Actually, you had sat down there, and I had come over to talk to you, again. You had done a very admirable job of avoiding me since my release from the hospital, but finally I had you cornered, not that I had any idea what I would say or do once I had your attention.

So, after sitting there in silence for a time, I simply turned to look at your profile and said, "I love you." It must have been at that exact moment that Josh took the picture, because I can see the emotion in your face and body, even from a distance. And then the oddest thing happened, you turned toward me and, while not exactly making eye contact, you said in a soft voice, "I love you too." Really, for the only time in the entire time that I've known you, I became quite frustrated, even downright mad. You weren't understanding me, and you weren't trusting me, which we had promised to do so many years ago in high school. So I placed my hand gently on your face and turned it to mine, telling you to look at me. You hesitated, but eventually raised your eyes to gaze into mine. Again, with our eyes locked I said, "I love you." A light of hope and joy flickered in your eyes, and I knew that everything was going to be OK. Not caring what anyone who might have been looking thought, I leaned in and gave you a very soft, quick kiss. Our first kiss. As our lips parted I

whispered again, "I love you, Jennifer." You simply said, "I know," and that was all I needed to hear.

### **Letter 13: Holidays**

*Dear Ethan,*

*Why do the holidays throw me into random foul moods? I'm fine and then all of a sudden I am keenly aware of the fact that I am quite alone. For instance, a group of my college friends all went out to a movie. There were no problems, besides my slight silent annoyance with one of my girl friends who suddenly began being a bit mushy with her boyfriend instead of listening to me while I was talking to her. We all bought our tickets and enjoyed the movie. As the movie came to an end and the theater cleared out, I became aware that I was the odd man out. I was sitting at the end of a line of couples, all of whom were now involved in some sort of conversation. I sat there as a part of the group, but completely outside of it at the same time. I didn't have anyone to talk to about this or that funny part. I didn't have anyone to snuggle up to quickly before the lights came back up to full brightness. I didn't have anyone to whisper and laugh with. No one helped me put on my coat, and as we drove off for dinner, I rode alone, as the others*

continued their conversation because they rode in the car of their loved one. There I was alone. The same thing happened at dinner, and when the waiter asked how the check was to be split, it was again made clear that I was still alone. I was the only one who had no one to share a bill with, nor was there someone to pay for me. It was just me. Only me.

At times like these, especially in the movie theater where it's dark and there are many distractions, I will become quiet and brooding. But no one notices. (Perhaps because there is no one to notice...) And if someone should notice, I simply put on an air of pensive reflection over one thing or another, as though that were the cause of my intense or downfallen face. The one good thing that I can say is that these moods do not happen all that frequently, and they only remain for as long as I wish to entertain them, but still...I can't help but admit that there is truth in these feelings. After all, I am alone. I don't have a boyfriend, not even close. In fact, I've never had a boyfriend. So what! Do I want a boyfriend? Of course! But I can't let it rule my life, and I can't let myself wallow in pity or fear. So, instead of becoming withdrawn, I will pray that God gives me patience and wisdom, so that I will be open to what he has for my life and that he will make me into the woman that the man he has

destined me for needs. And then, as I sit knitting on the couch, while my roommate and her boyfriend snuggle beside me, I will think of the promise that God has for my life, and smile, because I know that God has someone out there for me, and for you, Ethan. He's promised us both the desires of our heart, because he put those desires there, and he wouldn't have put them there if he did not intend to fulfill them, even if his timing is not what we think it should be. So, I will pray for myself, that I follow the heart of God. For my future husband, I pray that he also follows after God, making wise choices along the way. And for you, dear friend, I pray that you also have the patience to wait for the wonderful gift that God has for you. He will bless us both, if we will be patient to wait on him. In the meantime, I'm so very glad that he has given me a wonderful friend in you. I love you, Ethan, and I value your friendship and council so very much.

Anyway, I hope that you had a wonderful Thanksgiving and I can't wait to see you over Christmas break! (It will be nice to get away from campus for a while.)

Jennifer



## Letter 14 (Poem by Ethan in college): Doubt Poem

Jennifer, I wrote this thinking about your last letter and how I struggle with the same emotions. I hope this shows you that you're aren't alone in what you're going through.

### Doubt Poem

There are days when the sun is high, shining brightly in the sky.

The world's full of promise, full of love.

I know why I'm here...

Full of hope for a future that draws ever near.

And then there are days when the clouds block the sun.

I know there is love, but it's so hard to see.

For when the world is so cold,

Shadows are the only company for me.

Why do I doubt myself? Why do I despair?

My life has so many riches, but I complain about what's not there.

Why do I lose faith? Why can I not see?

You've given me everything that I'll ever need.

You stay by my side and love me though I doubt.

Your strength is mine, your power too,

If only I would learn to trust in you.

Those deep black days when all light has left my eye.

I could just let go, sink down so slow, and never again try.

To give up the fight, lay down my life,

It's what you want me to do, but I must do it in you.

I can't give up, can't lose the fight.  
This fight is for my life!  
It's not just the day, but my soul we'll save,  
And that's worth every price.

I can't do it alone, but you're here for me now.  
Your strength is mine.  
I believe.

Ethan

## **Letter 15: Tiffany**

Jennifer,

I'm in LOVE! Can you believe it? It's the most amazing feeling ever to know that not only do you completely adore a wonderful woman, but that woman loves you back! Oh, I'm so sad that you haven't met Tiffany yet, but we're coming home in two weeks for Christmas and then she'll get to meet all my family and you. Of course I've told my parents about her and they know that we've been dating for three months now, but I've never told them that I am in love with her. I was planning on telling them just how serious we are over the holiday break, but until then I can't keep all this joy inside, so I have to share it with my best friend. After all these years of hoping and praying that God would bring the right woman into my life, I finally know that it was Tiffany I've been waiting for. She's kind and beautiful and I can't wait for

you to meet her. I know you'll both be wonderful friends. And I know that we've only been dating for three months, but I'm sure that she is the one for me. Of course, we still have much to learn about each other, and it isn't as though we're going to get engaged suddenly, but I really feel like she is the woman I'll spend the rest of my life with! It's as though I recognized her as my destiny the moment we met.

Oh, Jennifer...I wish you could feel this happy. There's a part of me that feels bad having found so much joy with Tiffany while I know you are still searching for the man God has planned for you. But don't despair, because based on how wonderful Tiffany is, I know God has a man just as marvelous prepared for you. And someday, when he's ready and everything is in place, you'll see each other and know that you'll spend the rest of your lives together. I'm so happy that it's happened to me, and I can't wait for it to happen for you! I love you, dear friend!

Ethan

## **Letter 16: Pregnant with Abigail**

Darling Jennifer,

It's hard to believe this is actually happening. We tried for so long to get pregnant and now it has actually happened. It's such a wonderful miracle! I know that even though we had been trying for some time, I didn't have the greatest reaction when you told me that we were finally pregnant. These first few months have been

rather surreal, because I know that I am a father now, but until you started showing, it was just difficult to conceive what it all means and how much our lives are about to change. If I've seemed distant or confused, please understand that it isn't because I'm not excited. It's just that I'm suddenly struck with how much I love our little girl still forming deep inside you. (I know you don't believe me because you're afraid to be disappointed, but in my dream I'm sure God showed me that we are having a girl!) I've never met her, and I can't imagine my life without my little Abigail. Yet even while I have these overwhelming feelings of love and affection, just as strong are the fears of failure. Afraid of failing you and Abby, I'm overcome by an enormous cloud of doubt and unrest. What if I'm a terrible father? I'm not talking about dropping her on her head or changing diapers (which you are certainly going to have to help me learn to do), but the other things. The things not just big, but small that make a memory which sticks with you the rest of your life. What if I mess those things up? I didn't have the greatest model for what a father should be, and I'm so terrified of letting you down... of letting Abby down. At times, I'm so sick with fear that it eats at my very heart inside. What should I do in times like that? How do I dispel such fears and lies?

I'm not sure what I should do, but I know what you do to help me. You come to me softly, putting your hand on my arm and looking at me with eyes so full and soft, smiling sweetly all the while. The look in your eyes says that I am worthy and appreciated. You look at me as though I were the only man in the world, and I'm reminded of why I fell in love with you to begin with. And when you kiss me so

gently, I know that I am the luckiest man alive to have this beautiful lady who is ever so in love with me.

Love Eternally,

Ethan

## **Letter 17: Desperately Lost Without You**

Dear Jennifer,

Today was a long day! The good news is that it all ended well, though it was...interesting, to say the least. I suppose I should have started this by asking how everything is going with you and your cousins. How is it going? Is it relaxing and serene at the lake house? I hope so... maybe you could channel some of that peace to me, because I could sure use it!

You know, I love all our children dearly, but God only knows if Daniel is going to make it to be a teenager, let alone an adult! So here is what happened today...I was getting the kids ready for church. Abby was clean, dressed, and setting the table. She's such a help to me with the boys. Of course, the boys don't want to take any direction from her, but she's a little mother, and I appreciate her trying! She was getting Adam some cereal while I finished getting myself ready. At this point, Adam was basically dressed and decently clean. So, the oldest two are eating, when I go to start the battle with Daniel. I walk into his room, and do you know what I find? You wouldn't even be able to guess. Well, your son apparently found some bubble gum (I

can only guess that Adam hid some in their room) and the good news is that he didn't seem interested in eating it so he didn't choke. The bad news is that he had a really good time playing with the gum. I walked into the room to find gum in the carpet, gum in the blankets, and worst of all...gum stuck all through Daniel's hair. At this point, I thought that we could possibly still make it to church if I could only get the gum out of his hair, but that was not as easy as it sounds. What ensued was much hair pulling, crying, and eventually the use of scissors to cut the gum out.

Of course, the screams brought Abby and Adam, the latter with milk and cereal bits nearly covering him from head to toe. Who ever knew that a two year old could be such a handful? (Or that a four year old could make such a mess of himself in the space of about five minutes alone with his food!) Needless to say, the family didn't make it to church today. Honestly, I don't remember the first two being such a challenge. Maybe it's because I am seriously out numbered and out witted? I hope your trip is rejuvenating, because I am very much looking forward to your coming home! (And I'm sure the kids are looking forward to having some decent food again.) I love you so much and I'm glad that you're coming home soon! (Very Glad!) I miss you, baby.

Your Husband Who's Desperately Lost Without You,

Ethan

## Letter 18: Stabs of Pain

ENGAGED?!!! Why, God! Damn it, why is this happening? Why do I have to feel like this? Please, just take it all away! If I can't have him, at least give me the peace to stop loving him like I have all these years! He's not mine; he'll never be mine! Please let that message sink in and fill the gaping cracks in my heart! I can't keep doing this, feeling and thinking these horrible things that sneak around my soul. He's hers, God. He belongs to her. He's given her his ring, his heart, and his promise. Yet all I can think about is how it should be me! Why the hell doesn't he love ME!!! What's so wrong with me?

Even as I sit here wanting so much to hate her (I can't even write her name, how pathetic is that?) I can't find the emotion there because she is a genuinely wonderful person. It would be so much easier if she had some horrible past and had cheated on Ethan or done something to hurt him. Then I could hate her for hurting him; exalt him for being so kind, forgiving her, and loving her anyway; and complain that he should have been with me because I would never do anything to hurt him. I would love him the way he should be loved. I would care for him and look at him with eyes so adoring until the day we died. But she hasn't done anything like that,

because she is a kind and generous person who loves Ethan. And so all I can do is sit here and hate myself for feeling these evil things.

The day after they came home and announced at the church spring picnic that they were engaged, do you know what Tiffany gave me? Flowers. She gave me a bouquet of flowers that she said had been laced with prayer for my future husband. It was the sweetest, most thoughtful gift anyone had ever given me, and here I am jealous because I want the prayer on the flowers to give me her fiancé! What kind of twisted person am I?

Yet, even as I write, the emotions begin to calm to a dull ache and I feel that the beast within me is being tamed. I know that I love Ethan and that I shall love him until the day I die. But Tiffany is the woman he's chosen. She's the one he loves, the one he wants, the one he dreams about at night. Hers is the face he pictures in his mind when he thinks of beauty and perfection. Hers is the voice that makes his heart jump. She is the woman he'll take to be his wife. She is his choice. Not me.

Maybe someday I'll understand why it wasn't me. Maybe someday, I'll find the man who will look at me with eyes so full of love and a touch full of promise and adoration. And then I'll realize that this was all for the best. God, let that day be soon,



because I don't know how many more nights I can lay in bed and cry my eyes dry over this man who I love too much. Oh God, to feel numb or alone would be better than this knife that stabs at my every hope and dream. I want him to be happy! I truly do, but must his happiness come at such a personal cost? Must I feel it *this* much? And how can I face him again; how do I remain his friend when I know that I long for so much more, yet to lose his friendship would end me as well. Am I strong enough to be the supportive friend he needs, to be everything he needs of me, while knowing that I would willingly give him so much more if only he asked? Can I really give him the few parts of myself that he wants as my friend when I long so completely to reach out and give him everything that I am, both good and bad, and have him give me all of himself in return? Yet he's already promised to give himself to her completely. So where does that leave me, half alive and holding back?

Oh Lord, can't you please just take it all away? Can't you just make all feeling disappear? The pain, the stabs will leave scars I'm sure, but I can't bear to be ripped open night after night. Let the wounds close and try to heal. Even with the strength you promise us, I don't think I'll be able to bear much more of this and Ethan says he still needs me. I know I need him, which is probably the problem. I

guess I'll have to give him up. God, I don't know if I'm ready for that, but I think it's the only way to try and move on. Maybe then we can still be friends, when I learn to fall out of love with him.

## **Letter 19: I Still See You**

My wife,

How is Heaven? I hope you are enjoying seeing your parents again. I'm sure you already know this, but I have finally managed to kick the children out of the house. Don't worry, they stayed here with me for a few weeks per your request, but it was time for them to get back to their lives. I know they are still worried about me, and honestly I don't mind that. It makes me feel loved. But I do wish they would stop asking me to come live with one of them. After all, this is our house. I built those bookcases, you picked out those curtains, and we painted these walls. In this house, I feel like there is a part of you still here. I can see you in the kitchen cooking pumpkin pie for Thanksgiving. I can see you in the living room reading a book, or at the table grading homework. And forgive me for saying it, but I can see you in our bedroom, wearing your tan and green nightdress and asking me to please turn off the light and come to bed already. Even sometimes the smallest of things will trigger a memory, and the memory brings you back to me, if only for a short time. And maybe it's strange or silly, but I'm not ready to give that up yet. I can't give you up. On second thought, I guess I do have to give you up. I mean, I don't actually have a

choice seeing as you are already gone from me. But, well you know what I mean. I know that I will never forget you. I wouldn't want to, and even if I did want to, it simply wouldn't be possible. You were and are such an enormous part of my life, a driving force, the voice in my head urging me forward, and that will never go away.

## **Letter 20: Afraid to Lose the Pain**

God,

*I know I've been in pain and that tonight at church I prayed for you to take away the aches that my loving Ethan is causing. It was so bad that I sat there, fists clenched, trying not to shake with the force of holding back my tears. All I wanted to do was be near him, be with him, to love him and have him love me. In my desperation I cried out to you to take it all away and make the pain stop!*

*And suddenly I was filled with peace. I didn't feel the desire to watch his every move from across the room and wonder if he ever watched me. For one brief moment, I felt a sweet calm that I haven't known in his presence for so long. But just as soon as my wish was granted I regretted asking you to take the pain and I panicked.*

*God, I really do want Ethan to be happy, whatever that means*

for him. But if that peace means that I'm supposed to stop loving him and move on...I just don't know if I want that! I mean, logically I want to be with the man you've designed for me, but everything else in me *SCREAMS* out for Ethan! I know that I should want your will for our lives more than anything, but to be honest I want *HIM* to be your will for my life more than anything else at this point!

Oh God, can't you see that he's everything I've ever wanted? He's kind, generous with his time, helps others...he's so beautiful, inside and out. I don't think he even knows how wonderful he is. And when he laughs...I can't help but laugh too. It's as contagious, goofy, fully of mirth, and beautiful as everything else about him is! To see him smile makes my heart leap and I can't help but pray that he would look into my eyes and smile at me like that for the rest of our lives!!!

So instead of welcoming the peace you gave, I fought it because I'm terrified it means he really isn't the one for me, despite, what my heart keeps saying. And until there is no chance left, until they both say "I do," I think I have to hope that maybe he'll change his mind. Oh, how wicked am I to wish that on them?

Dear God, help me. Let me try again to give you control of my

life and not tell you what I think is best. God, I'm so afraid to give up my love for Ethan because, what if I never feel like this again? I think that's what I'm so scared of. What if he is the perfect one for me, but he chooses someone else over me? And what if that's it? What if you take him out of my heart and that love is never replaced by another? Then I would just be empty. At least with my love for Ethan, even if I don't have him, I would have the pain for company. It may sound pathetic, but at least then I wouldn't be hollow and alone. The pain hurts, but it reminds you that you're still alive.

The problem is that even if Ethan did pick me, he still can't complete me, only you can do that. Only you have the power to make me really alive and I forget that far too often.

Lord, if every day is a new chance to start again, help me to trust you more tomorrow and put you first in my life...even above the love and pain I feel as I stand in a corner watching my dream and see him slipping ever further away. Please God, help me to not be so afraid of what tomorrow may - or may - not bring.

Jennifer

## Letter 21: Letter to Abby

Dear Abby,

My darling college girl! How are you? Are your classes going well? You're not too stressed, are you? And what about that new boyfriend of yours? James, was it? What is he like? Will we meet him at Thanksgiving or will he be going home to his family? On the phone, you sounded very excited about him, and I'm so happy for you!

Now, about this paper you're writing. I have no idea why you would ever think that a paper about your father or me would be interesting, but here is what you wanted to know and I hope it helps. You've already heard the story about your father's accident, and on the phone I told you about how he said he loved me, and how it both excited and scared me, but I didn't have time to explain why I wrote him later telling him that it wouldn't work between us. (Oh, by the way, I had to go suddenly because Adam was having some "issues" with Daniel. Apparently Daniel decided that Adam's science project - a working example of how the ground filters water - looked like a great ant farm and he was filling it with an assortment of bugs and insects!)

So, I told your father that it wouldn't work, because...well, at first I just couldn't believe that what he said was true. He couldn't love me; it was just too good to be true. Besides that, he was on so much medicine at the time that I was just sure his judgment was completely thrown askew. In my mind, he simply didn't know what he was saying. Actually, now that I think about...I'm sure he didn't know what he was saying! You see, at the time of the accident, your father was engaged to a girl that he had met in a class at college. You didn't know that, did you? How would you, we've never really talked about anything that happened around the time of the accident. It was such a trying time for everyone in the family, and it still hurts to reopen those old wounds, so it's just been easier to look past that time.

Anyway, your father was recently engaged to a very lovely girl named Tiffany whom he'd been dating for nearly a year. I had met her twice, and was trying very hard to be completely supportive and excited for your father. You must understand, I had fallen in love with your father not too long after meeting him, but more than anything, I just wanted him to be happy. So if Tiffany was the one that he was supposed to be with, then I was going to be there for him, cheering him on and wishing him all the best in the world. But that

didn't stop my heart from breaking. Every time I saw him on a weekend home from school, every time I looked at his picture, every time I thought about him, or wrote to him, or talked to him on the phone, every time...my heart broke just a little more. I began to wonder if I could take it, if I was really strong enough to be the supportive best friend I had set out to be. And your father, God bless him, was so blind to it all. For a while, I thought I was just that good of an actor...ahh, my own vanity. Whatever it was that kept him from seeing the truth in my eyes, it worked for a very long time. Perhaps it would have kept on working. Who knows, my baby-sweets, if you would be here today to ask these questions and write your papers, if that horrible accident had not happened.

But it did happen and then everything began to change. I have never asked him to explain all that happened in those few days, for it is still too painful for him. (And he has been able to heal better than others in the family.) What I do know, is that he was extremely shaken that day. Maybe the shock awoke something inside of him and he realized how short our time here really is. Or maybe he just personally grew enough to open his closed eyes and see the world all around him. Whatever it was, he suddenly saw through the mask I had been wearing for the past few years. He saw the love I



had for him, and realized that he had all this time been in love with me. Your father has never been a man to take things slowly or to even think through all his moves. (Which is probably why he is so lousy at chess and Adam can wallop him every time!) There he was, confessing his love for me while he is engaged to another woman!

Oh, I could have shot the man! It all seemed like a horribly cruel joke and I just couldn't handle it on top of every thing else that had happened. I knew he would never be intentionally cruel, but he was still young and naïve. The day after he told me he loved me, Tiffany arrived. Needless to say, I hid. Maybe this sounds stupid, and maybe a bit self-righteous, but I didn't want to be responsible for breaking up his engagement. I mean, OK, I wanted them to break up...I'll be honest. I was in love with him, and I very much wanted him to be in love with me. But I didn't want to influence his decision. I wanted him to do the right thing, to choose the woman who God wanted him to be with. I didn't want to make things harder for him. And just in case his proclamation had been only the drugs talking, I wanted to give him an easy out so he could save face and we would remain friends. (Because even if he never held me in his arms and whispered "I love you" in my ear, I couldn't stand to lose him as a friend.) So, I sent him the letter saying that I did love

him (because I couldn't lie to him and pretend that I wasn't in love with him) but we couldn't be together, explained how sorry I was, and would he please forgive me. I gave him the letter through his mother and then I hid. He sent me a confused and hurried reply, but I barely read it, though I remember holding it and staring at it unseeing for a very long time as tears fell down my face. It was the longest few days of my life.

Your dad was eventually released from the hospital, and a few weeks later all our group of friends and family came together for a picnic to start getting our lives back to normal. Needless to say, I wasn't in the mood to socialize, and then I saw your father coming toward me. He sat beside me and after a while of silence, he told me that he loved me. I could feel my heart break to the point that I nearly cried out in pain. Not looking at him, I said that I loved him too. Beside me, I felt something that, until then and since then, I've never felt radiating off of your father, anger...anger at me. I was confused, but before I could register it all, his hand had gently taken hold of my face and he was forcing me to look at him. When our eyes finally met, he looked at me, as though looking into the very heart of me, and said, "I love you." His words sank into my very being and filled all the cracks and tears in my tired heart. We never

really talked in much detail about how he had broken up with Tiffany, and at the time I couldn't even say for sure what the future would have in store for us, but I just knew, beyond all doubt, that our futures would be lived out together. A month later, we were officially engaged, and then the following spring, almost a year to the day after we sat under that tree at that picnic, we were married.

Well, that was a bit longer than I had intended it to be. I hope it helps you, and I look forward to reading your paper. Say "hi" to James for me, and remember that I am so very proud of you and I love you so much. You are a blessing to me, our family, and the others around you. God has such wonderful things in store for you, my sweet-heart girl, so don't ever be afraid of his plan for your life. It's not always fun, and there will be pain, but it is so worth the journey. So keep on walking, loving, and living in the fullness of God's mercy and grace. We love you. Hugs and Kisses!

Mom

## Letter 22: Message in a Bottle

Dear Nobody...or Anybody,

*It's amazing just how alone a person can feel. Class has a few days yet until it starts back up for the next semester, and so I sit here at my parents' home reading book after book in an attempt to fill one moment to the next so that I don't feel quite so alone. Or maybe it's so that I won't realize that I'm alone, or as distraction so that I won't have to admit that I'm alone. I don't know...it's probably a bit of all of that. Of course there's always the popular opinion that I'm simply addicted to the written word, which I will admit is true. But why am I? Why do I like books so much? Is it because I enjoy imagining myself as the lead character? Because I secretly (and not always is it such a secret) enjoy and even crave to be the center of attention, and while I am the heroine of a novel I am able to live an exciting life full of energy and love? Why do I crave attention? Does it all go back to being lonely? And all the while, I'm trapped in a cycle of tedium and loneliness that seems never to end. Oh, who cares! What do I have to complain about?*

*I went to see a movie today in the theater. I'd been thinking about going to see something for a while now, but I never went because who wants to go out to the movies alone. Well, today I went,*

and it was strange. I once told Ethan that it was weird to go to a movie where you were the only person not part of a couple. Well, this was odd too, though in a different way. Now, it wasn't like I was being left out of something or that I was ignored. This time, it was as if I didn't exist. I was just a shadow in the theater. After the movie I went shopping, and there I transformed from a shadow into an object, an obstacle to hinder the path of other shoppers as we all pass silently by each other, trying very hard to not only pretend that we didn't just accidentally make eye contact (which is forbidden!), but that everyone else simply doesn't exist.

On the way home, I began to think, "What if this was my life...forever? What if this was how I was to spend the rest of my time here on Earth? I would work, go out sometimes, and then I would go home. And when I got home, I would have to decide what to make for dinner, and then what to with the rest of my evening, which would probably end with me reading a book. (Oh, by the way...at the store tonight, I bought another book. Big surprise, huh?) Then logic kicks in and I know that I'm going back to school in a few days time, and I'll be back with my friends and I won't be so alone, at least for a time. Yet, I can't help but wonder...is this what life is? I mean, I know God has a plan for my life, and I know that he loves

me and than I am and will continue to be blessed. But I still can't help but wonder.

Then of course, at times like these my mother's voice pops uninvited into my head saying things like, "If you want friends, you have to be a friend." Which means that rather than sitting here alone I should call one of my old high school friends to see if they want to do something. But the only person that I ever felt really comfortable with is Ethan. And I would call Ethan, that's what I usually do, but he isn't here this weekend. He went to visit Tiffany's family. So here I sit, alone in my parents' house, because it's hard for me to reach out to people. I don't know, maybe it's because I'm so scared of being rejected that I'd rather live in loneliness and not risk being turned down. Maybe I don't have enough self-esteem. Perhaps I don't believe in myself as much as I think I do. In my head, I know that I'm a good person worthy of love, joy, peace, and happiness. But it's difficult to shake the feeling that surely everyone would rather be spending their time with someone else... someone more interesting, exciting, funny, and worthy. I know that my feelings of inadequacy aren't valid, but it's hard to get things from the head to the heart.

You know, I've always wanted to send out a letter in a bottle because it seemed like a hopelessly romantic thing to do. Plus, I

*think it would be fun to find a letter in a bottle. But I'm not so sure I would want you to find this letter. What would you think of me, I wonder? Would you try to find me? And if so, for what reason and to what end? Or would you read the letter and laugh with your friends about some poor girl with fairy tales in her head and too much time on her hands? Maybe you wouldn't even open the bottle. Maybe you'd throw it away with other litter, or kindly chuck it back into the water for someone else, who had less troubles on their mind, to find and then they could worry about what they would read inside. Ahh, I wonder what you would do. But we will never know, because of course this will never find its way into a bottle. (I'm far too sensible for something like that. Not to mention that I live nowhere near an ocean or even a major river.) No, this letter will never reach you, which is, of course, probably for the best.*

### **Letter 23: Robby**

Brother,

I know that you will never read this, but I have to say this so that I can move on. I forgive you. I'll never know what was going through your head in those last moments, and even if I did know, I don't think I could ever really understand, but I

love you. Despite everything, I love you; I always have and I always will. I mean, you're my brother...

Anyway, the funeral was beautiful. Everyone we knew from high school came and all the guys that you worked with were there. Aunt Ginna came and took care of making all the food. It was really nice of her, but you remember that time she cooked Christmas dinner? Yeah, well this ended up just a little bit better than the food that year. Of course you were never a picky eater, just as long as the food was free and there was plenty of it, so you probably would have had a good time...well, you know what I mean. And mom...she's doing all right. She's a lot quieter than normal.

Damn it, Robby, why did you do it! I mean, even if I hadn't been in the car with you, what could have been so terrible that I couldn't have helped you? You were my little brother! I would have done anything for you!

Anyway, besides me, no one else was hurt, which is really good news. The other good news is that I'm going to be fine. That's what the doctors say. "You're going to be fine." They say the words, but I always wonder if there's some doubt lurking behind the finely rehearsed detachment in their voices. Are they thinking of the psychological trauma I've suffered? Do they doubt that I'll "fully" recover? Well, I will! I'm determined to for my sake, for mom, dad, Jennifer, the whole family.

Oh, yeah I forgot to tell you. Jennifer has been visiting me in the hospital. Do you remember all the time we spent together in high school? Well, when I woke up to her sitting with our parents in my room, I felt like I'd been hit in the pit of my stomach. Luckily I was a mess and they all just thought I was recovering, so the fact



that my face drained of blood and I broke out into a cold sweat just seemed natural to everyone. Oh man, I wish you were still here! I should be telling you about all of this as we lay in the backyard after throwing the ball around. We would be waiting for mom to yell at us to come in, wash our hands, and set the table. And as we waited, I would tell you all about how I had gone and screwed things up royally by falling in love with one woman while I was engaged to another. You would laugh at me and call me a jerk, and then you would listen as I belly ached about how much I loved her and you'd counsel me about what I was to do. I miss you, Robby. I need you. What happened to you that you lost all hope? I'm sorry if I wasn't there for you enough after I left for college. I'm sorry for all the times I put you down when you needed a hand up. I'm so sorry...I'm just glad that, even if I wasn't always there for you, I was there with you at the very end. In that moment, you weren't alone. At least I could do that for you.

Ethan

## **Letter 24: Letter to the Kids**

*Dear Children,*

*Well now, where do I begin? I suppose, the most important thing is that I love you all so very much! You have been the best part of my life and I thank you for that! From the moment that each of you were born, I knew that you would bless all those you would meet.*

You are all my special gifts from God, and I will personally thank him for each of you when I go home to Heaven, which I'm afraid is going to be sooner than we had anticipated. My only regret is that I will not be here to see you through all the wonderful stages of your lives or as your families grow and change.

Abigail, you are such a strong and beautiful woman. You love and honor your husband and you're raising your children to know the Lord. I very much look forward to seeing them as they grown and mature. Just remember that, though you have always been something of a perfectionist, this world is very much imperfect! It's OK to make a mess, take chances, and have some fun. Don't worry so much about appearances. If anyone is looking, they will only see joy and love in you and your family.

Adam, you have always been a highly intelligent and hardworking man. I'm so glad that I was able to see you married to as sweet a woman as Chelsea and I am also glad that I will be able to meet your two twin babies before I am gone. You have always taken care of me, and I want to thank you for that. I know that the same dedication you showed when I became sick will also be given to your family as it begins to take shape. Don't forget that work will

always be there, but your children are only children for a short while. Be sure you don't miss it!

And last...my youngest. Daniel, my dear troublemaker, you gave me all my grey hairs, but still kept me feeling young. You have always been a challenge for me, and I thank God for you and that He had the wisdom to put you last. (If you had come first, Abby and Adam may never have been born! I'm just not sure I could have handled it!) You taught me so much about myself, forced us all out of our comfort zones, and were often a whirl wind that swept through the house, leaving me quite unbalanced. It was difficult and wonderful. I am so glad that you have met the woman of your dreams, and I'm sorry that I probably won't be here to see you on your wedding day, but I will surely be there in spirit. Tell Megan I'm sorry, but I am going to ask God to give you at least three children just like yourself so you can know what I went through!

Oh, my children...I love you all so much! I'm so sorry that I'm leaving you, but I know that you will all be fine. Don't worry about me, I'm not afraid and I'm not in pain, at least not much. I do worry about your father. He's being so strong for me, but I know that he is in pain, much more than I am. I don't want to leave him, but I'm afraid I don't have much say in this. Please take care of him. I

know, of course, that you already would, but I'm still your mother, so I suppose I still feel the need to give instructions. Tell him to get out, to laugh, to see his friends, maybe even to date. (Oh, that's odd. I don't know that I really like that idea that much. Well, you all understand...) I just want him to be happy! That's all I've ever wanted. I'm so glad that he was able to find happiness with me, while we could. I'm glad that you were all a part of that happiness. I know I haven't been a perfect mother, but never forget that I love you. I Love You! Oh, but I'm tired and the kettle for my tea is calling to me, so I'll end now. I love you all, my dear ones!

May God Bless and Keep You All!!!

Mom

## **Letter 25: I'm Afraid, Momma**

Dear Momma,

I'm working on a puzzle. You would like it. It's a picture of earth and other planets and stars soaring in outer space. I asked Ethan to pick one out for me and that's what he chose because he knows how much I've always enjoyed astronomy, even though I don't really know that much about it. Even when I was little, I would stare out the window at the moon in awe, and I knew that the heavens

were made by God to show his beauty and glory. And though you would never tell me if you thought there could be other life out there somewhere (you would become quite irritated by my constant questioning), knowing or not knowing doesn't take away from its general splendor.

Anyway, I was talking about the puzzle. Ethan wasn't really sure why I wanted a puzzle, seeing as I've never been too fond of puzzles. Truth be told, and maybe it's silly, but I wanted the puzzle because it makes me feel closer to you. I need that right now because I'm beginning to feel scared. I know that I shouldn't be, I know that in the end everything will work out for the best (that's what I keep telling my family), and I am very much looking forward to seeing you again, Momma. But still, I'm frightened. I don't want to leave Ethan and our children. I want to see my grandbabies grow old and I want to see my sweet children struggle with their kids as I struggled when raising them. It breaks my heart that I was so blessed to have you around to help me, and now I won't be there for them when they have questions. I won't be here to calm their fears, I won't see their tears and be able to tell them that God loves them and it will all get better. Oh, but I'm afraid!

Well...at least I'm not so angry anymore. You'd think after living all the years I have, that I would realize that there's no point in getting angry at God, because in the end you realize that not only does it do no good, but it really can do you harm while not changing a darn thing. Circumstances are what they are. Life's not always fair. (Wow, I kind of sound like you now.) And, I know all those things are true, but I just wish I weren't so scared. How do you get over that? Can you make the fear go away? Can you just make up your mind to do it, and then not be afraid anymore? Will dying hurt? I really don't want it to hurt. I'm already in pain, and I'm not sure I can handle it getting much worse. Oh God, I'm not ready! Why does it have to be like this?

Ethan made me a wonderful lap table to put my puzzle on. It's big but not very heavy and it fits the puzzle wonderfully so that I can work in bed if I don't feel up to sitting at the table. He is so wonderful, encouraging, supportive and I'm very afraid for him. He's not like you. After Daddy died, you were able to keep going. You got involved, got out, and eventually you were able to soldier on. I know that he will keep going for the children's sake, but I'm so afraid for him. I just want him to be happy, but at the same time, I really don't like the idea of him with another woman. Of course, I

think that is just because... well, at the moment I'm still here. It's very hard, you see, to imagine the love of your life falling in love with someone else.

Oh, but enough about all of this. I've only about 75 pieces or so left to go on my puzzle. I should finish it shortly, but I don't think I'll have time for another one. Funny that my first puzzle should also be my last. And that it's a picture of the heavens, because I feel that I shall be there very shortly. I hope it is even more beautiful than my picture. But of course it will be! God wouldn't have created it, then raised my hopes so high only to disappoint me in the end. I'm looking forward to seeing it, and to seeing you, Momma. I love you very much!

Your Daughter,

Jennifer

## Letter 26: Saying Goodbye

Dearest Ethan,

Oh darling, I'm so sorry that everything is quickly coming to an end. I've tried so very hard to keep fighting, but I'm just so tired. I know you understand, you've even told me that it's OK to stop fighting. You know the pain this old body of mine is in, and you are sweet enough and selfless enough to just want me to be at peace. Yet I feel like I've failed you. If I'd only believed a little bit stronger, or somehow prayed harder, or fought longer. Logic tells me that we did all we could do, but I'm so afraid to leave you. I know that to go home to Heaven will be wonderful, but I would very much like to die in your arms, in our bed at home. To just go to sleep after making love one last time, to be cradled in your arms that have always been there all these many years, and to know how deeply I was loved here in this world. Then we would drift to sleep, and with my last breath I would whisper, "I love you, Ethan."

But perhaps it is a blessing to know when you will die. I have been able to spend time with my family, and I have been keenly aware of what a blessing each member of our family is. I have written letters to old friends forgotten long ago, to thank them for what they have meant to me. In a way, knowing that I am dying



has given me the chance to bring closure to my life. I've been able to do and say those things that I was always putting off to the next day, which none of us are assured will ever be there.

But how do I bring closure to us, Ethan? I don't know if I can, or if I even want to. You, Ethan, have been the single greatest blessing in all my life. Without you, I would certainly not be the person I am today. You have taught me about life, love, God, and myself. The way you touch my hand or look at me makes me feel special and cherished. Thank you! Thank you for all our time together. I have no regrets, not one! And I don't want you to have any either. I want you to go out and have a blast! Maybe even start dating again, someday. (Not too soon of course! I'll have to approve of her, and you have to be home by a decent time. Believe me, I'll be worse on you than I was on the kids!) But, joking aside, I just want you to be happy.

The last request I have is that I don't want to have some stuffy, dreary funeral. Have a party! I want people to be laughing and dancing! I want it to be messy and loud, just like our house always was when all the children's friends were over. I want it to be...uplifting.

*And after the party is over, then you can go out to our favorite spot on the lake, and...you can talk to me, and...I'll be right there with you! I promise! Have one of the kids stay at the house with you the first few nights. I don't want to think of you alone in the house. And be sure you don't forget to eat; you know how your sugar gets. And... Oh God, I don't want to leave you!*

## **Letter 27 (Poem for Jennifer's funeral): I Had a Love Like That**

### *I Had a Love Like That*

*Some may sit around and dream  
Of times and places and people yet to be.  
They think that someday their lives will change,  
But for now they live in a make-believe world,  
Where time can be rewound and then fast forward.  
And love is found and lost in one night  
Of dreams so sweet they vanish with the light.*

*I had a love like that.*

*Some people walk around and dream  
Of times and places and people they see.  
They think that someday their lives will change,  
But for now they live life in an exciting way,*

Where time is only life lived day by day.  
And your love could be waiting behind any door  
To be found, loved, and then gone once more.

I had a love like that.

But some people get to live the dream  
Of times and places and a person they need.  
They know that someday their lives must change,  
But for now they live in a world completely transformed,  
Where time is precious and so short, be forewarned.  
And your love, your soul mate, is there by your side  
Until that sad fateful moment when one must die.

I had a love like that.

I was a man that lived the dream  
Of times and places and a woman...my wife.  
I knew that someday our life would change,  
But I didn't know it would end this way,  
Where time would be stolen and taken away.  
And so if you still have your mate by your side  
Hold her close; let her know she's the love of your life.

Because, I had a love like that.

I lost my love like that.

By Ethan, for Jennifer

## Letter 28: Plea and Promise

My Darling Jennifer,

It's been 34 years to the day that I gave you up to God and you were finally at peace...home with the Lord. So many things have happened since then, wonderful things. I've seen our children grow older and raise their families. I've seen them experience a mid-life crisis as their children leave the nest and begin lives of their own. I've even seen 5 great-grandchildren! So much love and joy throughout the years.

But even after so much love and pain (pain so acute there were times I felt I'd not survive), I have come to a realization. I'm ready. I love my family and I love my life...but I'm ready to go home.

So, with that said, I close this note and retire tonight with a plea and a promise...

wait for me just a little while longer, my Love. I shall be with you very soon.

**I Believe Statements by Jennifer at the end of her life:**

*I believe in God.*

*I believe in love.*

*I believe laughing at yourself, even if it's hard.*

*I believe in crying.*

*I believe my parents knew more than I once gave them credit for.*

*I believe I don't know as much as I once gave myself credit for.*

*I believe in soul mates.*

*I believe in loving someone for as long as you live.*

*I believe in forgiveness and second chances.*

*I believe in pain and sorrow.*

*I believe you can learn from the pain and sorrow to overcome.*

*I believe that relationships are work.*

*I believe sleep is undervalued and the nights when I have dreams are too few.*

*I believe in PMS, but*

*I believe it's a terribly overused excuse*

*I believe in saying I'm sorry...over and over again.*

*I believe good friends are few and should be respected.*

*I believe family is always there, but is too often taken for granted.*

*I believe money is important, but not most important.*

*I believe in make believe and imagination.*

*I believe in unexplainable miracles.*

*I believe death shouldn't be feared, but*

*I believe I want to live.*

*I believe I have, and will touch lives.*

*I believe if I am gone tomorrow, I will be missed, but*

*I believe I will be in a better place.*

*I believe that when I die, my family should have a party.*

*I believe in kindness.*

*I believe in spirituality.*

*I believe in myself...though sometimes it's hard to do.*

*I believe in today and the promise of tomorrow...wherever that may lead.*